Strategy for Mainstreaming an Alternative Growth Model

IMATA KATSUJI

Pro-Growth Narrative

Today, we see a predominance of pro-growth narrative in almost every corner of the globe, and Asia is no exception. This pro-growth narrative is still strong in many industrialized countries such as Japan, where "growth" is a key word uttered by politicians to gain support. In the developing world, it is usually stronger. They say, "you had your turn; now it's ours to grow." It is a dream of economic prosperity and the belief that economic prosperity would bring happiness.

The pro-growth narrative may not be harmful per se, but it usually manifests itself as "growth at the expense of …" which becomes problematic. For example, growth at the expense of negative environmental impact is seen in the energy debate. Fossil fuel may still make sense from an economic point of view, but the world has come to realize the damage caused by CO2 emission. In the face of the growing norm to put a stop on climate change, the emerging economies and developing countries contend "it's our turn to grow" and put a blame on developed countries for the accumulated harm all the way from the industrial revolution. A compromise reached by the international community, albeit an imperfect one, is called "common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR)," which takes into account the different circumstances, particularly each country's role by which the current climate problem generated.

Another example of the "growth at the expense of" is seen in the dichotomy of development and economic growth on one hand, and democracy and human rights on the other. It is an unfortunate dichotomy as they do not necessarily have to be a trade-off. Yet, we see many leaders of developing nations today, especially in Asia and Africa, who commit to bold measures for economic development and growth, carry out policies so as to fulfill the commitment and, unwittingly or not, put the democratic principles on the back burner.

This primacy of economic growth at the expense of other values and principles has become a source of many issues we see in the world today. Two are mentioned above but one of the most serious issues is growing inequality. Recent history tells us that wealth does not trickle down easily, and we see an increasing economic disparity in both developed and developing nations. An analysis from the Credit Suisse Research Institute shows that "the richest 1% of the world's population…owns nearly half of the entire world's wealth" in 2013.[1] Figures also show that in the last 20 years, "the share of national income going to the

[1] Max Lawson, "World's Wealthy One Percent Highlights Extreme Inequality," *The Huffington Post*, (October 13, 2013), <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/max-lawson/worlds-wealthy-1-percent_b_4085767.html?utm_hp_ref=fb&src=sp&comm_ref=false>.

most affluent 1% of Americans has doubled…. In China, the richest 10% are now taking home nearly 60% of the nation's income, putting Chinese inequality levels almost on a par with those of South Africa, which is one of the most unequal countries on earth. Inequality in South Africa is significantly worse [now] than at the end of Apartheid."[2] To put things into perspective, a visual representation on how much money has been spent on different areas of the economy, called the "Billion Dollar Gram," was used to illustrate some examples of disproportionate levels of spending. It shows that as of 2009, the total cost of the financial crisis to the U.S. government was $2.8 trillion, and the money spent on the Iraq war was estimated to be $3 trillion, as opposed to "only" $100 billion in foreign aid given by the world's major donors. With the kind of money used to save the financial industry, the world could have been saved at least 28 times.

Mainstreaming an Alternative Narrative

Thus the call of Occupy Wall Street in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008 was "we are 99%." Now more than ever, this 99% need to be united under a clear and simple yet powerful alternative narrative to the pro-growth model. Largely speaking, it is "democracy and development" in which both go hand in hand, with a strong focus on the former and respect for human rights, social justice, and equity.

The questions before us are how can we tip the balance between the dominant pro-growth narrative and the alternative? What are the ingredients for change? How can the vision of social justice and human rights become compelling enough to override the pro-growth narrative? We need to map our strategy that responds to these questions. Below, a sketch of a strategy is drawn, with civil society organizations (CSOs) as the protagonists. Although not all of them can be change-makers, it would not be too far-fetched to use CSOs as proxies.

It seems that our starting point is obvious. It is to start with "anger." Anger is the fuel that provides energy to take action. Looking at the growing inequality, the global financial crisis and its aftermath, and the blatant tax evasion of the rich, the question is actually how can we not be angry? As a natural course of action, we need to express our anger, create communities and networks to communicate our collective anger through different channels. Obviously, in the age of social media, it can be used to mobilize our collective feeling.

Our second step is to build a theoretical foundation for the alternative narrative. Keywords such as post-development theory and "the Great Transition" already attract avid readers. The former finds more followers in the Continental Europe, with authors such as Wolfgang Sachs, Arturo Escobar, Serge Latouche and others. Some works by Latouche, a French theorist, have been translated into Japanese with "de-growth" in the title. The latter finds more followers in the English speaking world, with the Great Transition Initiative in the

[2] Ibid.

United States and the Great Transition Project by New Economics Foundation in the United Kingdom publishing a series of articles and essays. The focus of the Great Transition includes planetary limits, ecological sensibility, quality of life or well-being, social justice, and human solidarity.

Our third step is to acquire a perspective to look at events and to strategize. In the development community, for example, the rights-based approach to development can be used. With the centrality of human rights, this approach identifies actors as "duty-bearers" and "rights-holders." The idea is to create a collective influence in order to make the duty-bearers accountable. Usually the relationship is between the state and citizens, but a relationship on the micro level, such as between a mother and child, can also be looked at. We need to work on observing these relationships between two parties in different settings in order to make sure the duty-bearers are held accountable.

Strategizing means avoiding a "grand design," which may have been a pitfall that social movements experienced in the past. Instead, strategizing means understanding political dynamics, engaging in consultation, working things out, and walking the winding path of how changes happen—these are extremely important. In its path, holding onto the value of participation, especially of the marginalized and powerless, is essential, as it is the voice of the marginalized that needs to be heard and have influence.

Our fourth step is to work "within the system" and identify leverage and push points for political influencing. Various tools, such as legal instruments, people's voices, and international norms and standards, can be used and mobilized. Some people say that this is not a very effective approach as the "system" is already broken. For example, the United Nations may not have any real power especially in the realm of security and economic issues. This may be true, but CSOs still need to use the existing system and continuously put pressure on governments, set standards and norms, and hold them accountable in terms of the promises that they make. There need to be more repercussions when governments do not follow through with their promises.

Working within the system does not simply mean you engage in "politics on the corridor." Making use of the diversity of civil society actors, we need to showcase an array of engagements CSOs can employ, including "politics on the street." It is often the case that CSOs are more effective when some are in the room negotiating and others are on the street demonstrating.

Finally, after going through all these ideas and points of entry, one of the most important items is to tell a story. Tell a story, tell more stories, and tell many more stories. During the Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) 2013, fellows went on field trips and heard many stories of struggles. In Kamagasaki, Osaka, a local leader told a history and present situation of day laborers in Japan, and in Fukushima, fellows learned about the struggles of organic farmers after the March 2011 nuclear disaster. Powerful stories move

people and cultivate our collective empathy, which is what we need to see more of in the world today. It seems that the challenge is communicating stories more widely—not just for the consumption of knowledge, but to make them a source of collective action.

After all, it is important to note that the first point, anger, and the last point, telling stories, are more about appealing to one's heart than one's head. We need to be mindful that things that are visceral are powerful and drive us forward. And we need to drive forward.

Paper received from the author in June 2016